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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: SUBTLE SHIFT IN STANCE ON MACEDONIA

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Classified By: CDA Alex Karagiannis for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

Subject: BULGARIA: SUBTLE SHIFT IN STANCE ON MACEDONIA

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Bulgaria has subtly shifted policy toward Macedonia, tacitly linking Sofia's support for Skopje's Euro-Atlantic integration with Macedonia's conduct of "good neighborly relations." Both government officials and NGO experts recognize that Macedonia's EU and NATO accession is strongly in Bulgaria's interest and that Sofia would not benefit from political wrangles with its southwestern neighbor. Bulgarian officials are nonetheless exhibiting some frustration and annoyance. They perceive that the Macedonian government tolerates "anti-Bulgarian" rhetoric in textbooks and media; and they recoil at Skopje's purported promotion of the internationalization of the "Macedonian minority issue." Over the past year, President Parvanov and Foreign Minister Kalfin have openly criticized Skopje for not fulfilling its obligations under a 1999 declaration that (by Sofia's reading) requires Macedonia not to intercede on behalf of the self-declared Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. The Prime Minister's foreign policy advisor noted that Macedonia is needlessly creating irritants with Bulgaria, which if unresolved would pose political difficulties for Bulgarian support for NATO membership. Meanwhile, a prominent Bulgarian NGO seeks to improve relations and nudge the GOB to clarify its position more positively on Macedonia.

END SUMMARY

BULGARIA'S EVOLVING STANCE

¶12. (SBU) Bulgaria was the first country to recognize Macedonia's independence in 1991 and has maintained close and supportive relations since. Over the years Sofia has provided financial aid (during the embargo on former Yugoslavia), military equipment, and political support. In early 1999, to defuse tensions which had arisen over long-standing cultural and linguistic issues, the Bulgarian and Macedonian Prime Ministers signed a declaration in which Bulgaria recognized the Macedonian language as distinct from Bulgarian (but only within the territory of Macedonia). The document states the two countries have no territorial claims against one another. Seemingly in contradiction to Article 49 of its own Constitution (as Bulgarians read it), Macedonia agreed in the 1999 declaration that it would not interfere in Bulgaria's internal affairs to assist the self-proclaimed Macedonian minority living in Bulgaria. Whatever its possible shortcomings, this agreement allowed the two countries to conclude several other pending economic and political accords.

SOURCES OF FRICTION

¶13. (C) Bulgaria demonstrated unreserved support for Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration path until July 2006. At that point, both Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov and

Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin stated Bulgarian support for Macedonia's membership in EU and NATO would no longer be unconditional, but instead tied to Macedonia's implementation of the 1999 declaration. Some of this is, we suspect, Bulgaria exerting its leverage by being in NATO and the EU. Some arises from complex historical, linguistic, cultural and ethnic factors -- many Bulgarians are unconvinced that Macedonia has found its identity or footing as a modern state, and are themselves conflicted when Macedonians who have never lived in Bulgaria seek Bulgarian citizenship in order to travel to EU states.

¶4. (C) Whatever the causes or motivations, it has a policy impact. The prime Minister's foreign policy advisor told us in June (reftel) that provocative statements against Bulgaria and about minority and human rights issues was weighing down the relationship. Bulgaria looked to Macedonia to meet NATO membership criteria and solve its internal issues. But he also hinted that left unresolved, bilateral irritants would pose political problems for Sofia to support NATO membership.

¶5. (C) While the Bulgarians have usually mumbled rather than trumpeted their concerns to us, this is what they have identified over time as key questions whether Macedonia is engaging in "good neighborly relations."

¶6. (C) OMO ILINDEN PIRIN: Some members of the Macedonia minority in Bulgaria have unsuccessfully tried for years to register a political party, OMO Ilinden Pirin. Bulgarian courts have denied registration, citing insufficient membership or irregularities in the application. Veering to Balkan conspiracy theory, many in Bulgaria believe that OMO Ilinden Pirin is purposefully failing to meet registration requirements in order to attract publicity and international

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support for its cause. Others believe that Macedonian and Serbian intelligence services, as well as pro-Macedonian international organizations, provide OMO Ilinden Pirin with financial support. Recently the group won four cases against Bulgaria in the European Court of Human Rights, which ordered the GOB to pay the group approximately USD 32,500 in fines.

¶7. (C) Bulgarian diplomats claim the Macedonian government is responsible for "internationalizing" the "Macedonian minority issue" in Brussels and Strasbourg, drawing special attention to it on the eve of EU Monitoring Reports on Bulgaria. OMO leaders also received political support from visits by the Macedonian Ambassador in Sofia and Skopje's Deputy Foreign Minister. "Politicization" of the issue worries MFA officials and NGO experts, who fear that Bulgarian nationalist parties would stoke populist reaction. Already, the nationalist VMRO and xenophobic Ataka have joined efforts in the Pirin region to openly resist OMO Ilinden's activities.

¶8. (SBU) TEXTBOOKS AND MEDIA: Academics and NGOs in Bulgaria assert that, in Macedonia, the negative image of Bulgarians and Bulgaria among Macedonians is exacerbated by Macedonian textbooks. They say that geography texts depict the Bulgarian region of Pirin Macedonia as separate from Bulgaria; history texts claim that Bulgarians are Tatars by origin who tortured civilians in territory occupied during World War II; and that the Macedonia Encyclopedia echoes these negative stereotypes. MFA contacts assert that Macedonian media is overwhelmingly negative towards Bulgaria. Bulgarian media watchdogs claim three popular national daily newspapers in Macedonia consistently publish negative propaganda against Bulgaria.

¶9. (SBU) TARGETING BULGARIAN CITIZENS, GROUPS AND MONUMENTS: Unknown individuals have several times destroyed the monument of Bulgarian revolutionary and national hero Mara Buneva located in Skopje. In January (by dipnote) and June 2007 (in public statements), the Bulgarian Government protested aggressive acts against its citizens at this monument. The activities of "Radko" (a pro-Bulgarian civil association

founded in Skopje in 2000) have been hindered by both the 2001 Macedonian Constitutional court's ban on the group and the 2006 sentencing to prison of its founders. Bulgarians are also still scratching their heads over the December 2006 arrest and detainment for a few days of Bulgarian truckers carrying light weapons from Macedonia to Bulgaria, which seemed to be motivated by partisan political factors in Macedonia, but which dragged Bulgaria into accusations of criminal arms smuggling.

BULGARIA NGO URGES NEW POLICY

¶10. (SBU) Not all the news is negative. In an effort to define the GOB's policy toward Macedonia and to spearhead a more result-oriented dialogue, the Atlantic Club in Bulgaria (ACB) initiated a series of meetings with Bulgarian diplomats, politicians, NGO experts, and academics to develop a policy paper on Macedonia. (Note: ACB is led by influential former FM and 2004 OSCE Chair in Office Solomon Passy). The first meeting in May 2007, organized jointly with the Diplomatic Institute, was attended by Deputy Foreign Minister Lyubomir Kyuchukov. The ACB is still actively working to promote Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, though progress is slow.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Individually, none of the bilateral irritants amounts to very much. And to outsiders, they have the air of Balkan intrigue and mischief making, of feuds and petty quarreling. But, overall, Bulgaria's still amiable relations with Macedonia have acquired a less positive undertone over the past year. Senior contacts here worry that partisan maneuvers, internal problems and the name dispute with Greece are leading some Macedonian politicians to maladroitly play nationalist cards (and could tempt Bulgarian politicians along the same lines). We see low-grade annoyance mixed with a more nuanced commitment to help Macedonia join NATO and the EU. While Bulgaria is not above seeking to exploit its new found leverage through NATO and EU membership, it also wants stability and predictability on its borders (with a wary eye on Kosovo and Serbia). Both countries will benefit from re-energizing -- on their own initiative -- healthy senior level dialogue.

Karagiannis